

**Submission
No 36**

INQUIRY INTO WAMBELONG FIRE

Name: Mr Michael Bowman

Date received: 30/01/2014

Michael Bowman, Gundy, Tooraweenah

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Parliament Inquiry into the Wambelong Fire in the Warrumbungle National Park in January 2013.

I have been a landholder at Tooraweenah in the Gilgandra shire for 35 years owning and managing four properties with my family. I am also the current Captain of the Uargon Rural Fire Service (RFS), a position I have held for the past 25 years. I have also held the position of Group Captain in the Gilgandra Shire and am presently Deputy Group Captain for the Warrumbungle Mountain Group of brigades in the Castlereagh Zone.

I have been heavily involved in four major fires in the Warrumbungle area, including the Wambelong Fire last January. My concern is that where local volunteers knowledge was once highly valued and utilised to put out fires, decisions are no longer made at the fire ground by local volunteers. This causes significant delays, increases costs to the taxpayer and creates bigger fires with a higher potential for tragic consequences.

The first of these fires was the Toolangatta fire in the Tooraweenah area, which began by lightning strike on January 14, 1999. This fire was in an area under the responsibility of the Uargon RFS, of which I was Captain. Rather than back burning, members of the brigade worked alongside National Park crews and a helicopter to contain the fire. This fire was about 1km SW of the National Park. On a local volunteer level we had total control. This fire was successfully extinguished without escaping our control.

The Angel's Gap fire started mid December 2001, again, by lightning strike. It burnt private property to the west of the Warrumbungle National Park. At this fire my position was Group Captain of the Gilgandra Shire, working with the Captain of the Warrumbungle RFS. At one stage National Parks' employees were given orders from head office to back burn an area where we were having trouble containing the fire. It seemed as though they made this order without consulting the Group Captain or Captain in control as to the situation on the fire ground. If they had carried out those orders I believe the fire would have quickly got out of control and spread into the National Park with potentially terrible consequences. Thankfully they agreed to accept my decision not to back burn and the crews turned their attention to working with us to control the fire. I believe local knowledge and control of the blaze meant it was contained within a pre-determined control line, without major incident.

The Bull Mountain Fire followed a few weeks later, in January 2002. This fire took hold on the western end of the Warrumbungle National Park and covered both private property and the park. Again I was there in the capacity of the Group Captain of the Gilgandra Shire, working alongside the Captain of the Warrumbungle RFS. Hard work by local RFS and National Park crews (utilising a helicopter) brought the fire under control to the extent that all that was needed was regular patrolling. I considered it to no longer be a threat.

However the situation changed dramatically when outside crews, sent in from Coonabarabran started carrying out back burning across 2.5km, in an area to the east of the original fire. There was no fire break to the north of the back burn and neither I nor any local officer controlling the fire scene was contacted regarding the need to burn. The back burn subsequently got out of control and was declared a Section 44 the following morning.

Michael Bowman, Gundy, Tooraweenah

I believe that the decision to back burn was a mistake as the original fire was under control. Good communication with the local controllers on the scene could have prevented the fire tripling in size and being designated a Section 44, which resulted in considerable cost to the taxpayer and the lives of many fire fighters were put at risk.

It is my belief, with more than 45 years experience fighting fires, local controllers must be allowed to have total control of the situation. Decisions from head office, made without consulting local Captains controlling the fire, are potentially dangerous.

The most recent fire, and the subject of this Inquiry, highlights the concerns I have with decisions being made without local knowledge or consultation.

The Wambelong Fire started on Saturday, January 12, 2013. At the time I was the Captain of the Uargon RFS and the Deputy Group Captain of the Warrumbungle group.

I have many concerns with the way this fire was handled. From the outset there was a complete absence of communication with local captains such as myself. My first knowledge of the fire came at 7pm on Saturday when one of my sons happened to see it mentioned on the RFS website. In response the Fire Control Office in Coonabarabran was contacted and we were told it was "under control and not to worry about it". The following day at 5pm (January 13th), some 25 hours or more after the fire had started, I received a group text message advising the fire was now out of control. At that stage it had apparently been out of control for many hours and declared a Section 44 that morning, yet as Deputy Group Captain of the Warrumbungle area the text message was the first communication I'd received from Fire Control Office. This is also particularly concerning because the Weather Bureau had issued warnings all week about potentially catastrophic conditions on Sunday.

Once we were alerted to the situation we mobilised crews immediately. I took our CAT 1 and crew towards Coonabarabran, linked with Gowang and the Tooraweenah RFS crews and headed to Belar Creek, Morrissey's Lane, Hawker's Road and Bugaldie. We also mobilised all other fire fighting equipment, placing trucks on stand-by at the side of the Newell Highway in case of other fires.

I believe that if authorities acted earlier and used their local Captains more, the fire might not have got out of control in the first place or at least been contained to an extent where the damage was much less. As it was, we were lucky to escape without loss of life. I believe there was a period of between 12 and 15 hours from around 8pm Saturday where the fire should have been attacked before it got out of control, instead of leaving the fire to return the next day to back burn. At this stage the fire was only around 20 hectares in size and as we now know, it eventually burnt out more than 50,000 hectares. Had I been involved, knowing the weather conditions forecast for Sunday, I would have called for an all-out attack on the Saturday night.

Pre Fire Preparation

The fire was a disaster even before it started. Prevention is better than cure yet there was insufficient hazard reduction done in the park. There were no decent fire breaks or areas that had been back burned to restrict the fire once it started. All fire breaks around and through the park should be wide enough so that if a tree falls it cannot reach from one side of the break to the other. As it is, many of their breaks are only as wide as a bulldozer, with thick bush either side and trees

Michael Bowman, Gundy, Tooraweenah

touching overhead. This is also an issue for back burning, so it can be done quickly and without having to blacken it out before moving on. It is also required for safety reasons, such as if a tree falls you can still get passed it and is wide enough to turn around.

The communications centre on Mt Cenn Cruaich, which is vital in any fire event or emergency, had absolutely no protection at all from the fire. There are trees right up to the towers and insufficient fire breaks around them. This became an issue as the fire progressed.

At all times there should be plans in place regarding staging areas for equipment and other resources. While there was a staging area at Coonabarabran, there should also have been similar areas at Tooraweenah and Gumin. Resources coming from the west had to register at Coonabarabran before being sent into the fire, often covering the same ground and wasting valuable time.

The Fire

Fighting the fire posed enormous challenges and risks for those involved. I believe that not enough effort was made to contain the fire and as a result it got away. If more had been done to keep the fire small on the Saturday night and Sunday morning the end result might have been very different and certainly, easier to control.

It is not understating it to say that the chain of command failed. The RFS failed to alert some of the local Captains to the fire and even when they finally sent a group text message, the fire had been out of control and declared a Section 44 for hours. The very declaration of the Section 44 had huge implications for the management of the fire.

Divisional Commanders were brought in from outside the district to organise different sections of the fire and they did not know the local area. Those with local knowledge, like myself, were not considered to take on one of these roles. On several occasions these Divisional Commanders failed to take any notice of advice or warnings from local Captains or even landholders with detailed knowledge of their own properties, the terrain and previous fires. I believe this approach must change.

One notable disaster was the back burning of an area around Mt Cenn Cruaich, which operates as a Communications Centre, housing all emergency services radios, TV towers, radio towers, mobile phone towers and so forth. The back burn got out of control and destroyed 6000 hectares of private land.

The back burn was organised at the Fire Control Office using National Parks planners, who had little knowledge of the area or the conditions of the fire break. They also failed to ask any advice from local Captains, who were unaware this back burn was to occur. On Wednesday January 16th, in a bid to protect the infrastructure, incendiaries were dropped by aircraft however there were not adequate containment lines in place.

The night the incendiaries were dropped, a back burn was to take place for about 7km from the Tonduran Spire to Mt Cenn Cruaich. The Divisional Commander told me he had not seen the area in daylight, nor inspected the fire break before starting the burn. The break was only as wide as a

Michael Bowman, Gundy, Tooraweenah

bulldozer with a huge amount of undergrowth on each side. There were trees touching over the track and no room to turn around, making this a very dangerous area to back burn. I advised him of the situation however the incendiaries had already been dropped so he had no option.

The day after the back burn started, five fire trucks were trapped on this break when a tree fell and there was nowhere to turn around. This emphasises the need for fire breaks that are wide enough to cope with falling trees and the like. These fire fighters were lucky to escape with their lives that day.

Bad planning put many lives at risk. They had three days to put a decent fire break in this area but did nothing. Had local captains been informed of these plans, we would have demanded better fire breaks be put in place.

This back burn (which possibly was not necessary) burnt out many more properties, with losses of fencing stock and feed, was lucky that it did not reach the Mendooran district. It was only for one large property running along the Newell Highway, which was heavily grazed resulting in little fuel for the fire that saved the fire from crossing the Highway. Had it crossed the highway fuel loads were high which would have resulted in it being in the Mendooran area that afternoon. This would have resulted in huge stock, feed and fencing losses.

I also believe there is an over reliance by the NPWS on back burning as a means of control, rather than directly fighting the existing fire. Back burning sometimes dramatically increases the size of the fire as it is often the back burn which gets out of control. This can create even greater problems and potentially huge losses.

The bigger a fire gets, the greater the risk to life and property. It is my experience that some out-of-area crews fail to realise what the most important assets are on rural properties. Livestock and infrastructure, fencing and feed are as important as the house. Leaders of crews from outside the local area need to be educated of that fact. In my mind, more emphasis is needed to contain a fire, rather than sitting and waiting to save a home. The recovery period for those that have lost part or all of their fencing, livestock, buildings and feed is many years, and the emotional strain of having to rebuild is enormous and ongoing.

It is obvious that some RFS Zones have a huge problem in the way they manage large bushfires. Control is being taken away from the local Captains, Deputy Group Captains, while their invaluable knowledge of the fire grounds and the districts in which they live and work is being ignored. We now have more access to fire fighting tools such as planes, helicopters, fire trucks, graders and bulldozers which are very beneficial to fire fighting, but this fire showed that good organisational skills and common sense from our salaried RFS staff is sadly lacking.

I also believe that the RFS bureaucracy has grown far too large and has become completely inefficient. There are too many paid staff. The organisation's wheels turn very slowly – fires don't wait for anyone. I understand 36 per cent of the RFS budget is spent on wages. Fires are put out by volunteers and fire fighting equipment, not office workers. I also think the head office must be moved to a regional area to reconnect with the rural area they are meant to serve.

Group Captains and their deputies are elected by their local RFS brigades to make the decisions on the fire ground but during this fire were not given the opportunity to do so. Decisions were being made by paid RFS and NPWS employees in the Fire Control Centre in Coonabarabran. Many of these

Michael Bowman, Gundy, Tooraweenah

decisions were made by staff that had not seen the fire or fire ground. Control of fires must be from the fire ground by local captains and their deputies, not from an office which is out of touch with what is happening on the fire ground.

This inquiry should look into who made the fatal decision to back burn on a catastrophic fire day (which had been advertised by the media all week) a day that a match should never have been lit, instead of attacking the fire the previous night, when in my opinion they had 12 to 15 hours to control this fire.

I believe that legislation should be put in place so that the salaried members of the RFS and NPWS should never be allowed to make these decisions. These decisions should be made by the local Group Captains, Captains and their deputies of the area that are elected by the people that are going to be affected.

The salaried members of the RFS were put in place to help the volunteers of the RFS. Now in certain zones the salaried members believe that it is their job to make these decisions.

In closing I wish to thank members of this inquiry for their time and effort and hope that it results in many positive changes. I am willing to speak to the Members of The Inquiry if invited.

MICHAEL BOWMAN

"GUNDY"

TOORAWEEAH.NSW 2831